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Local History


Sherman Williams



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LOCAL HISTORY

BY

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LOCAL HISTORY

A recent writer has said, "Europeans regard a general knowledge of the history of their country, province and city, as an essential factor in even an elementary education. Inquiry by the American visitor will lead to the discovery that almost every intelligent peasant boy is at least fairly informed about the annals of the locality; its heroes are his own, its glory is reflected in the enthusiasm with which he recites their deeds to the passing stranger. But when the immigrant, emerging

from such a background, arrives in America he is apt to find that those among whom his social lot is cast know little of our national history, and naturally nothing of the career of the state or city; his children are not even taught local history in the public schools. Small wonder if he concludes that America has no history worth the telling, no state or city heroes worthy the name; that America "just grew up" and is merely a land of opportunity in which to make dollars."

"Can American patriots be made out of

these foreigners in the face of such neglect? Can a man be taught to love his country, or his state, or city, unless he is taught that great deeds have here been done, that here high ideals are cherished, that his locality has been and is a factor in civilizing the New World? Are even our American born boys and girls being made into the same sort of patriots that they rear abroad? Is it not time that as teachers we pay some regard to our state and local history; that we begin to cultivate a taste for this study in the minds of youth, and therein lay

the foundation for that love of locality, which is the essence of civic patriotism?"

What do you think of this arraignment? Is it justified by facts? Let us see! People who cross an ocean 3,000 miles wide to make permanent homes in this country, people who break all home ties to do this, who come to this country because they had not prospered where they were, or who had been treated unjustly in the land of their birth, or who were so bound down by laws and customs that there was not a hopeful outlook for them or for their children,

would not, one would think, care overmuch for the land of their nativity, however much they might be attached to the friends whom they left behind. But this is not the case. They have been so instilled with patriotism that they are not willing to forget the home land, or to put the new home above it. So we have Irish-Americans, German-Americans, Italian-Americans, and so on. In some parts of the Canadian northwest the majority of the settlers came from the United States, but do you hear of their calling themselves American-Canadians?

It may be claimed that this is merely sentiment. Is it? A man who is proud of his family is likely to be a better member of it on that account. One who is proud of his race is likely to be a better man for that reason. A man who is proud of the community in which he lives is likely to help make it a better place in which to live; a man who is proud of his state or country is likely to be a better citizen because of such pride. But how can one have any intelligent pride in his country if he knows nothing of its history, its strug-

gles, its triumphs, its people, and the principles for which it has stood?

The people of New York have been specially negligent in this matter—more so than any of the other original states, even more so than most of the newer ones—yet no other state has so proud a history. But we allow our children to grow up knowing less of the history of New York than they do of the history of Massachusetts, or Pennsylvania, or Virginia. They have a fuller and better knowledge of the history of Greece, or Rome, or Great

Britain than they have of the state in which they live.

And we encourage them in this. It is because of the way history is taught in our schools that such a condition exists. How long shall we continue to act as though we considered a knowledge of the history of Ireland—a country of fewer than 5 million inhabitants, 3,000 miles away—more important to our children than the history of their own state, having more than 9 million inhabitants? How long shall we continue to take more pains to

instruct the pupils in our schools in regard to the history of a small country which most of them have never seen and never will see, than to make them familiar with the history of the great state in which most of them will spend their entire lives?

Why does this condition of affairs exist? Is it because we ourselves do not know the great part our state has played in history? Possibly. Andrew S. Draper once said "New York made history and Massachusetts wrote it."

Permit me to call your attention to some

historical facts that ought to be more than a "twice told tale" and will be to some of you. I hope that may be the case with all of you, but I fear it will not be. Compared with the history of the other original states that of New York is unique. The other colonies were settled by those who sought political or religious liberty or both. The Dutch who settled New York sought neither as they had both at home. They came solely for business. The settlers of Massachusetts sought religious liberty and obtained it, but they did not grant it to

others: witness the persecutions of the Quakers. Except New York no other colony granted perfect religious liberty; even the famous toleration act of Maryland would not be thought very tolerant now. Save for a short time during the administration of the autocratic Stuyvesant, the people of New York enjoyed perfect religious liberty. If one was loyal to the government, no matter what his religious faith, he enjoyed every right and privilege that was given to any one.

We have had dinned into our ears, in

season and out of season, the principles and the work of Samuel Adams, and have been called upon to become enthusiastic over the Boston speech of James Otis, and the Richmond oration of Patrick Henry, and to revere the principles they promulgated, but how many of us know of the resolutions passed by the Colonial Assembly of New York half a century earlier, in which the same principles were enunciated and with no less force?

We all know of the Boston Tea Party with its picturesque features, but how many

know that there was a New York tea party at an earlier date, lacking the picturesque features of the Boston affair but not one whit behind it so far as devotion to a principle was concerned?

How much do your pupils know of the trial of John Peter Zenger, the principles involved, and the far-reaching consequences? It was perhaps the most important single event in all our political history, as it reversed the old English law of libel, and established the freedom of the press.

Let us take a single illustration from among the many from which choice might be made to show how Massachusetts has always exploited and magnified her history, which is to her credit, and how New York has ignored hers, which is a disgrace to us.

The battle of Bunker Hill has been told in story, song and picture till every school-boy knows it by heart. It is as real to him as though it were actually taking place before his very eyes. He sees the British troops land. He sees them form in line.

He sees the brilliant uniforms and glistening bayonets. He sees the British in perfect alignment approach the American lines. He sees the line of flame along the rude redoubt, and hears the rattle of musketry. He sees scores of the British fall and the remainder retreat in confusion. He sees all this repeated and, after a brief interval, the British form for a third charge upon the American position. He sees them throw aside all that would impede their movements, and with the bull-dog courage characteristic of the British soldiers

again ascend the slope. They were not to be again received with a wasting discharge of musketry, as the Americans had exhausted their ammunition and were driven from the field, retreating slowly and sullenly, fighting as they went, with clubbed muskets or whatever came to hand, but in vain. All this is as clear to him as though it were actually taking place before his eyes, and this is well.

But the battle of Bunker Hill was not followed by any momentous consequences. It did not change history. If the battle

had never been fought, or if it had been fought and the patriots had fled like frightened sheep at the first charge of the British, the result would have been the same. There would still have been a great patriot army gathered about Boston. The British would still have been compelled to abandon the city. It is not claimed that the battle of Bunker Hill was of no account. Far from it. It did much to cheer and encourage the patriots. It showed them that it was possible for untrained, undisciplined, and poorly equipped men to withstand a

charge of British regulars; but the battle did not change history nor was it followed by any momentous consequences.

The next year there was a battle fought in the state of New York that was followed by momentous consequences, that did change history. It was the most stubbornly contested and the bloodiest battle in that great struggle. I allude, of course, to the battle of Oriskany, which sealed the fate of Burgoyne and led to the French alliance. But does every schoolboy know that by heart? Has he had that in story,

song and picture? Does he see that although it were actually taking place before his eyes? NO! Some of our school textbooks on American history do not even mention it, and very few of them recognize its importance.

New York is rich in history. She is an empire in herself with the history of an empire. Her important history does not receive adequate treatment in any general school history of our country, and can not. Much of the important part of the history of our state is not mentioned or alluded

to in our school histories. If our children are to know the history of our state as they should, it must be taken up as an independent study, and it is well worth a year of study. Pardon me if in the attempt to show why the history of New York should be given more attention I weary you with a repetition of much that you know well.

New York is geographically the most important state in the Union. It was fore-ordained that she should be great. That matter was settled when the continent was formed.

The Hudson river flows through the only low-lying, wide-open gap in the whole Appalachian mountain system from the St. Lawrence river on the north to the Gulf of Mexico on the south. Up as far as the Highlands, the Hudson is really an arm of the sea. The tide rises and falls at Troy, so that it is practically a dead level for 150 miles north of New York.

From Albany to the West for more than 100 miles, the Mohawk valley is a very easy grade, and from that point to Lake Erie the route is also an easy one. The physi-

cal geography of the country made it certain that the West would find an outlet to the sea through central New York.

Lakes George and Champlain furnish water connection between the Hudson and the St. Lawrence, with the exception of a short distance. Except for a short carry between Fort Edward and Whitehall, there is an all water route from New York to Montreal. This controls most of the trade between Canada and the eastern part of the United States.

Another northern route is up the Mo-

hawk, across to Oneida lake, and down the Oswego river to Lake Ontario.

Through the Wallkill and Rondout rivers and the Esopus creek, the headwaters of the Delaware and the eastern branches of the Susquehanna are easily reached, opening a way to a vast stretch of country. The headwaters of the eastern branches of the Susquehanna may also be reached with a short carry by the way of the Mohawk river and the Schoharie creek.

By going up the Genesee river, one may by short carries reach the headwaters of

the western branches of the Susquehanna and so reach a large portion of the southern part of the state or, turning to the south, reach the headwaters of the Allegheny and the Ohio and Mississippi valleys.

The rivers that have their source in central New York open the way to an enormous area of country. This fact made the Iroquois confederacy powerful. It also made New York of great strategic importance during the Revolution. It gives us the great Central railroad with its numerous connections north and south.

It gives us the Erie canal and, through that, the commercial supremacy of the country.

Physical geography has made New York the greatest manufacturing state in the Union. It has made her rich and populous. It has made her in all respects fit to be called the Empire state. A great state produces great men, and great men help to make a great state. Our pupils ought to know something of the men and women who have written their names large in the history of the state and the nation.

Bear with me as I call your attention to a few of these and the things that they did.

To Alexander Hamilton, an adopted son of New York, we owe the fact that we have a government worthy of the name. The convention at Philadelphia formed a constitution and submitted it to the various states for approval. The approval of New York was absolutely necessary to success. While the necessary number of states might have approved the constitution without New York, it would not become operative in the case of any state that did

not adopt it, and if New York alone failed we should have a country made up of two sections separated by a foreign state.

The New York convention met at Poughkeepsie. Nearly two-thirds of the delegates were opposed to the adoption of the Federal constitution, and were pledged to vote against it. Among the number so opposed was George Clinton, the governor of the state and a very strong man, who was chosen chairman of the convention, and Melancthon Smith, one of the greatest lawyers of his time. This was a discourag-

ing outlook, but Hamilton was not dismayed, and his great ability and untiring labors finally convinced the members of the convention that the welfare of New York, as well as the welfare of the nation, demanded the adoption of the Federal constitution.

While one son of New York gave us a form of government another, Robert Livingston, gave us a country to govern. But for him the United States would have consisted of a narrow strip of land along the Atlantic coast. The fact that the vast

Mississippi valley and land to the west of that is ours is due to the courage and persistence of Livingston. This story would require many pages for its fair presentation and I can only allude to it here.

Another great acquisition of territory, the value of which we are just beginning to see dimly—the purchase of Alaska—was solely the work of William H. Seward.

The Erie canal, with its many enlargements and extensions, changed and to a great extent made the history of the state and the great middle west. It was solely

the work of New York, and its successful accomplishment was chiefly due to the untiring efforts of DeWitt Clinton. How much do our pupils know of Hamilton, Livingston, Seward, and Clinton so far as their relation to the history of New York is concerned?

Our children are led to speculate as to who were the earliest inhabitants of Greece. How much do they know of the Indians of New York? Yet the Iroquois played a most important part in the history of our state and of the nation. Had the Iroquois

taken the side of the French, it is probable that New England, New York, and the states along the Great Lakes would be French in population, laws, and customs, if not in government, as is the province of Quebec today.

Our pupils know much of the lives of Benjamin Franklin, of Samuel Adams, of Patrick Henry, and many other prominent men of the other states, but how much do they know of Sir William Johnson, who rendered incalculable service through his control of the Iroquois? What do they

know of John Jay, the author of the first constitution of the state of New York, one of the commissioners to negotiate a peace with Great Britain, the first chief justice of the state of New York, the first chief justice of the United States, the president of the first society for the abolition of slavery, governor of the state of New York, delegate to the Continental Congress, president of Congress, secretary of foreign affairs, minister to Spain and to Great Britain—a man who had an important part in nearly every great move-

ment of his time? How much do they know of a score of other men of New York who were among the foremost men of the nation?

What are our children taught of the part taken by the men of New York in the great struggle for supremacy on this continent? Surely, not a matter of little moment and equally surely a matter in which New York distinguished herself. Of this struggle Parkman says, "It was feudalism against democracy; popery against protestantism; the sword against the plowshare; the issue

was long in doubt because it was union confronting division; energy confronting apathy; military centralization opposed to industrial democracy." It was really a struggle between greatly differing forms of civilization, and the outcome was to affect greatly the history of the world. Because of its physical geography, New York had to be the leading figure in that great struggle; yet our children know it as a series of French and Indian wars, without a glimmering of the part our state took in it, and with but little comprehension of what it all meant.

How many know that for a long time Albany was one of the most important colonial centres and, for a time, was practically the colonial capital? Here were held numerous meetings for making treaties with the Indians that affected nearly every one of the colonies, and here came representatives from every colony and from every Indian tribe of consequence. How many know that it was at Albany, at a meeting of a Congress held in 1754, that the first steps were taken toward the union of the colonies? How many realize that

it was at Albany that every continental and British army gathered for movements against Montreal, Crown Point, or Ticonderoga?

Our pupils are painfully ignorant of the part taken in the Revolution by the people of New York. Until recently New York has received little credit compared with what she deserved. It has been written again and again that New York was a Tory colony and did not furnish her quota of troops, yet the records show that she furnished 51,979 men, far more in proportion

to her population than were furnished by any other colony. Likewise, she furnished more money in proportion to her wealth than did any other colony.

She suffered from the War of the Revolution far beyond any other state. Massachusetts hardly saw a foe after the first year of the struggle, but from the first to the last, even for two years after Yorktown when hostilities ceased elsewhere, New York was a constant scene of warfare. The first, the last, the bloodiest, and the decisive battles of the Revolution were all

fought on the soil of New York. All told, 21 battles were fought in New York during the struggle for independence.

What acquaintance have the children in our schools with these facts? What opportunities are given them while in school to get this information? New York suffered from the Border wars as did no other colony. No pen can picture adequately the horrors of the New York frontier during the Revolution.

We know so little of our history that we are disposed to apologize for the lack of

enterprise and interest in early education on the part of New York, and the people of other states, especially New England, assume a kind of patronizing air that the facts warrant as little as they do our apologetic attitude.

This is not a time to discuss this matter, or to say more than that New York has a proud history in educational matters, and that pride finds its roots in the attitude of the early Dutch settlers of our State. It is true that education languished under English colonial rule, and during the few

years immediately after the close of the Revolution, because of the utter poverty of our people, a degree of poverty that it is now very difficult to comprehend. It is true that Massachusetts was earlier in the field in the matter of higher education, that is, the education of those who were to enter the professions. But in the matter of the education of the masses Massachusetts was and always has been behind New York, always excepting the time of the English rule.

I have briefly, very briefly of necessity,

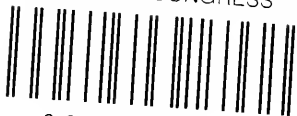
tried to impress upon you the important part that New York has taken in history. I have tried to convince you that it has been so important in itself, and that it concerns us so greatly, that it is quite as worthy of extended study as any history that could be taught to our children; that it would be more interesting, and tend more strongly toward the making of good citizens than would the study of the history of Greece or of Ireland.

Who can be expected to respect our history if we ourselves ignore it? Who will

think it of importance if we act as though it were not worthy of study? How can we expect our boys and girls to grow to be men and women who are proud of their state, and the better because of that pride, when we ourselves manifest no interest in it? If our children do grow up proud of the state in which they were born, and in which they are to live, it will not be because of what they have been taught in our schools but in spite of the lack of such instruction. Is our state one to be proud of? Is her story worth the telling? Has

she stood for worthy ideals? Have her accomplishments been worthy of notice? Can we point with pride to her history, or do we think it one of which the less said the better? Let our action correspond with our belief.

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